

A HISTORIAN LOOKS AT OUR POLITICAL MORALITY

Recent events, notably in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic, have prompted many people to wonder whether a change may be occurring in American political morality. Are we becoming less inclined to take into account the opinions of other nations? Are we more hardheaded, more "realistic"? In last week's issue of SR, those questions were explored by the poet Archibald MacLeish and by McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. SR continues this discussion in the following article by a distinguished historian.

By HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

"EVERY philosophy," wrote Alfred North Whitehead, "is tinged with the coloring of some secret, imaginative background, which never emerges explicitly in its train of reasoning." True enough—though *never* is a pretty strong word here. What is the secret, or perhaps the inarticulate imaginative background, that colors American thinking about relations with other peoples and nations in the past and today? Is it not the once explicit and openly avowed, but now implicit assumption of American superiority, both material and moral, especially to lesser breeds without our law? Is it not the assumption that America is somehow outside the workings of history, above the processes of history, exempt from such laws as may govern history?

The origin of this attitude traces back to the generation that created the new nation and came to think of that nation as a people apart. It is rooted in the long-popular notion of New World innocence and Old World corruption, New World virtue and Old World vice, a notion that runs like a red thread through the whole of our literature from Benjamin Franklin to Henry James, and through our politics and diplomacy as well. It is connected with the convulsive fact of physical removal—the uprooting and transplanting to new and more fertile soil, with the phenomenon of a con-

tinuous westward emigration from the Old World, while so few went eastward across the ocean. It is related to the American priority in independence and in nation-making, with the glowing achievements of the new nation—religious freedom, for example, the end to colonialism, the classless society—and over the years it was strengthened by the argument of special destiny, and by the experience of abundance and freedom from Old World wars, and of growth even beyond the dreams of the Founding Fathers. No wonder the notion of a special providence and a special destiny caught the American imagination.

SOMETHING was to be said for all this in the early years of the Republic, when the American world was not only new but brave. Rather less was to be said for it as the nineteenth century wore on—the century that saw the new nation indulge in so many of the follies of the older nations: slavery, racial and religious intolerance, the disparity between rich and poor, civil war, imperialism, and foreign wars.

But even in the nineteenth century, perhaps especially in the nineteenth century, Americans developed the habit of brushing aside whatever was embarrassing that still characterizes them, the habit of taking for granted a double standard of history and morality. There were, to be sure, awkward things in our history, but somehow they were not to

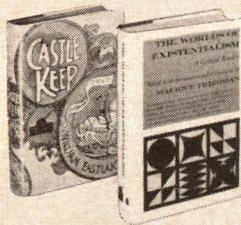
"...Having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic and wicked...."

—Thomas Jefferson, 1801.

be held against us, somehow they didn't count. The conquest and decimation of the Indian didn't count—after all, the Indians were heathens—and when that argument lost its force, there was the undeniable charge that they got in the way of progress. The students of my own college celebrate Lord Jeffrey Amherst on all ceremonial occasions, but few of them remember that Lord Amherst's solution to the Indian problem was to send the Indians blankets infected with smallpox! How many of us, after all, remember what Helen Hunt Jackson called a "Century of Dishonor"? Or there was slavery; it was pervasive and flourishing, and slaveholders defended it as a moral good. Somehow slavery didn't count, either, because it was nature's way of bringing the African to Western civilization, or because it was all so romantic (only recently have we developed a sense of guilt here).

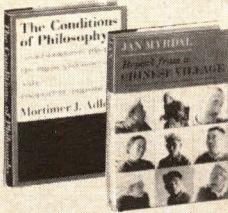
The Industrial Revolution, too, brought in its train most of the evils that afflicted Europe in these same stormy years, but that could all be put down as the price of progress, which is just what Herbert Spencer and his infatuated American followers did. And surely no one could assert that the price was too high. So, too, with what, in other nations, would be called imperialism, but with us was called "westward expansion"—manifest destiny working itself out in some foreordained fashion. The Mexicans do not take quite this view of the matter, but that has not

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troubled us. Even now we do not inquire quite as closely into the war-guilt question for the Mexican War, or the war with Spain, or the Filipino war, as we do for the Franco-Prussian War or World War I. Poets like William Vaughn Moody raised their voices in vain against the Philippine War:

Alas, what sounds are these that come
Sullenly over the Pacific Seas—
Sounds of ignoble battle, striking dumb
The season's half awakened
ecstasies? . . .
Was it for this our fathers kept the law?
This crown shall crown their struggle and their truth?
Are we the eagle nation Milton saw
Mewling its mighty youth,
Soon to possess the mountain winds of Truth
And be a swift familiar of the sun . . .
Or have we but the talons and the maw . . . ?

But who now remembers William Vaughn Moody?

We are no longer quite so sure of the New World innocence and Old World corruption as in the past—sometimes we suspect it may be the other way around—but the older notions of American superiority, and of the exemption of America from the familiar processes of history persist. They were very much in the mind of Woodrow Wilson when he prepared to make the world safe for democracy. But then the world we made did not suit us at all; clearly we had been betrayed by the wicked diplomats of the Old World. We cut our losses and withdrew into isolation and watched the Old World destroy itself with a kind of malign satisfaction, meanwhile congratulating ourselves that we were not involved and that our irresponsibility was really a form of moral superiority.

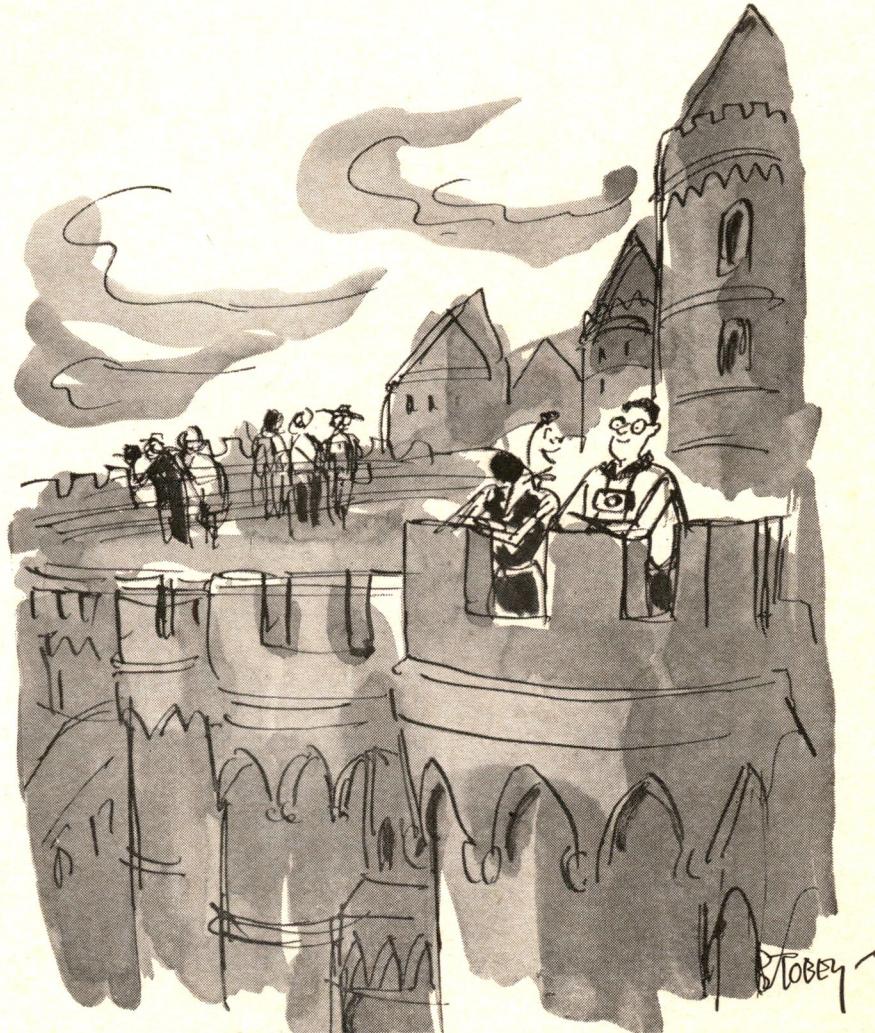
FOR we were very sure of our own virtue, and we read history to discover that we were a peculiar people. Our history books exalted everything American. They contrasted our Indian policy with the wicked policy of the Spaniards—that was part of the black legend—conveniently overlooking the elementary fact that the Indian survived in Mexico and South America but not in the United States. They painted slavery as a romantic institution, or perhaps as a kind of fortunate accident for the Africans. They even ascribed the exceeding bounty of nature not to providence or to luck but to our own virtue. In recent years many of our spokesmen commit the vulgar error of identifying an economy based on unrestricted exploitation of

natural abundance as “the American way of life,” and of scorning less fortunate people for having fewer resources and a different, and obviously inferior, way of life. We forget Reinhold Niebuhr's admonishment that “The more we indulge in uncritical reverence for the supposed wisdom of the American way of life, the more odious we make it in the eyes of the world, and the more we destroy our moral authority . . .”

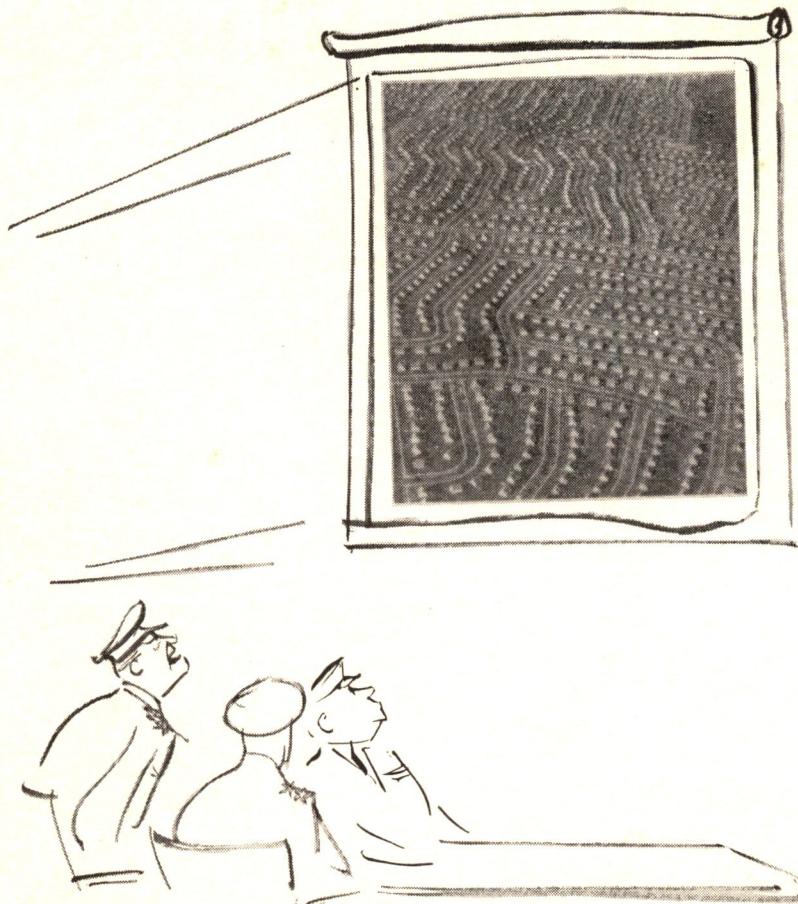
During the great war we responded, generously and unselfishly, to the challenge that confronted us; this was, in a sense, our finest hour, too: Lend-Lease, the alliance with Britain, the acceptance of the Soviet as an ally in the struggle against tyranny, the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations and the farsighted Marshall Plan, the response to the challenge of aggression in Korea. But the rising threat of Communism did what the actual attack by Nazi and Fascist powers had been unable to do. The prolonged struggle with Communism, which we sometimes call the Cold War, accentuated our innate sense of superiority. To vast numbers of Americans it justified—and apparently still does justify—resort to almost any weapons or conduct. For years now we have

heard, and not from extremists alone, that the struggle between democracy and Communism is the struggle between Light and Darkness, Good and Evil, and that the moral distinction is an absolute one.

THE arguments that were invoked to justify religious wars and religious persecution in past centuries are invoked now to justify sleepless hostility to Communism—even preventive war. Happily, the extremists have not had their way in the conduct of foreign policy, but we know how effective they have been on the domestic scene, how they have denounced as traitors those who do not agree with them and persecuted them with relentless venom, how they have poisoned public life, and private, too, preaching hatred of Russia, hatred of Cuba, hatred of China—hatred directed toward all those who do not agree with them and with their easy remedies. Those hatemongers, sure of themselves and of their moral superiority, have not hesitated to ignore law and the Constitution when it suited their book or to lie and cheat and betray in what they complacently assumed was a good cause because they espoused it. In 1801 Jefferson warned



“Oh, Milton, you would have been terrific as the King of Scots!”



"Spy satellite, bah! That's Levittown."

against suspicion and hatred in public life: "Let us," he said in his first inaugural address:

... restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things. And let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic and wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions.

Not since the fateful decade of the 1850s has that warning been more relevant than in this generation. Those who cultivate and spread the gospel of hatred throughout our society bear a heavy responsibility. They do not really weaken Communism; they weaken democracy and liberty. By their conduct and their philosophy they lower the moral standards of the society they pretend to defend. Eager to put down imagined subversion, they are themselves the most subversive of all the elements in our society, for they subvert "that harmony and affection" without which a society cannot be a commonwealth.

Much of our current foreign policy takes once again the form of indulgence in a double standard of morality. Thus it is contrary to international law to make reconnaissance flights over the ter-

ritory of another nation—the Soviet reminded us of that a few years back—but we boast that we make such flights over Cuba and over China: if Cuban planes flew over Florida or Chinese over Hawaii we might take a less easygoing view of the matter. We justly condemn Nazi destruction of Rotterdam and Warsaw, cities that were not military objectives, but we conveniently forget that we were chiefly responsible for the senseless destruction of Dresden—not a military object—within a few weeks of the end of the war, with a loss of 135,000 lives. It is a matter for rejoicing that we have the nuclear bomb, but when China detonated her first bomb our President told us that "this is a dark day in history." Perhaps so, though so far we are the only nation that has ever used the bomb—a fact which the Asians remember a bit better than we do. And even now Senator Russell assures us that he would favor using it again if our soldiers in Vietnam got into trouble. Even the present war in Vietnam—the President has now used the word *war* for it, so perhaps we can abandon the hypocritical vocabulary with which we have heretofore bemused ourselves—tempts us constantly to indulge in a double standard. The Vietcong engages in "terror attacks" but our bombings do not presumably hurt anybody. When we use gas it is not really gas but just something our own police

use here at home. Our airmen and marines are "observers" but the enemy's soldiers are terrorists. Guerrilla warfare—is it from the North?—justifies bombing at the source: if Castro accepted that theory and bombed those bases in Florida and Guatemala that launched guerrilla attacks on his island, we might take a different view of the matter. When the Russians announced that they would not tolerate an unfriendly government in Hungary, and sent their troops and tanks crashing into that country in 1956, we were rightly outraged, but we think it quite right for us to announce that we will not tolerate an unfriendly regime in Santo Domingo and to send 20,000 Marines to "restore order" in that island. We complain, and rightly, that other countries do not abide by their international agreements, but we are ready to forgive ourselves for brushing aside international agreements when we face something we regard as an "emergency."

We have always criticized secret diplomacy—remember President Wilson's crusade—but when the CIA operates with such secrecy that even our own government is apparently taken by surprise, that just shows how clever we are. For the Russians or the Chinese to stir up revolution in other lands is subversive of international order, but when we encourage a *coup d'état* or a revolution—from Iran to Brazil to Vietnam—it is all in a good cause.

We have not of late heard quite so much as some months back of what must surely be counted the ultimate arrogance—the cry of the "better dead than Red" crusaders. Those highly vocal martyrs are so sure that they speak for God that they are quite ready to condemn to extinction not only themselves and their fellow citizens, but the rest of the world and all potential posterity.

IT is three-quarters of a century now since Lord Acton made the famous pronouncement that all power tends to corrupt and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. We had thought, and hoped, that we were exempt from this rule, but it is clear that we are not. Power exposes us to the same temptation to ruthlessness, lawlessness, hypocrisy, and vanity to which all great powers were exposed in the past.

In a simpler day we could survive this threat of corruption without serious damage. We could count on wearing out the brief spell of violence and corruption, or on circumscribing its effects. But now that we are a world power and our conduct affects the fate of every nation on the globe, we can no longer afford this piece of self-indulgence. Now we must square our conduct with principles of law and of morality that will withstand the scrutiny of public opinion everywhere and the tests of history as well.